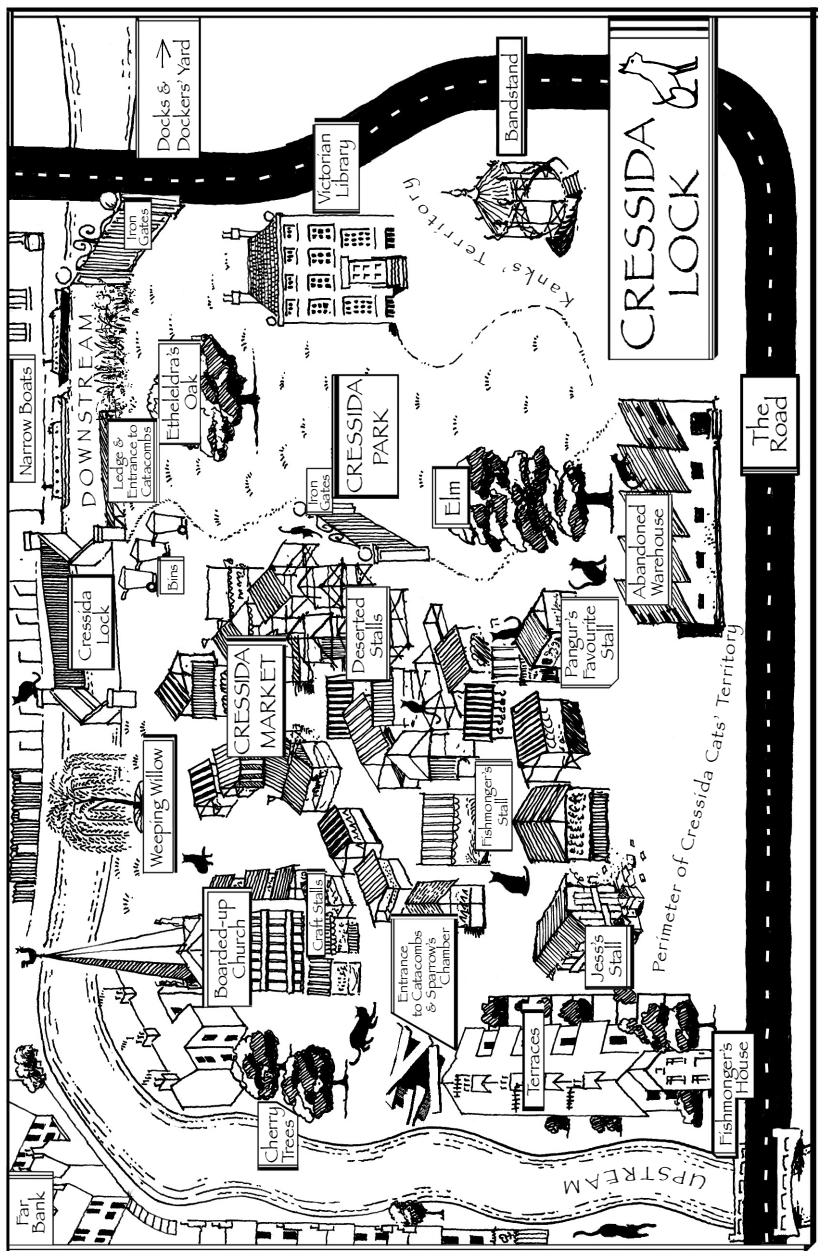




I am Cat.
I am honourable.
I have pride.
I have dignity.
And I have memory.
for I am older than you.
I am older than your Gods...

Paul Gallico, Honourable Cat



Prologue



The last glimmer of sunset settles over the desert. Black waves break against the ship, froth streaking the bow. Crouching in the cargo hatch, the Queen of the Tygrine cats tastes the air. Her whiskers bristle. It is time.

She pulls away from her son. "I will never be far from you. Look to the setting sun and you will find me," she tells him. The Queen turns, runs from the ship, sprinting along the gangplank and down onto the harbour.

Confused, her son calls after her. The engine groans, drowning out his cries.

Under her breath, the Queen chants a forgetting spell. Soon she will be far from his mind. Soon he will scarcely remember his own name. It is for the best.

A low mist clings to the harbour, masking the moon. With it comes a pungent smell like rotten eggs. Dark shapes shift

among the distant pines, drawing closer. They have come.

"I am the Queen of the Abyssinia Tygrine. I do not fear death," she says.

Yellow eyes emerge from the gloom. "Then come, embrace it!"

The Queen shudders. She knows that voice; she knows those eyes. It is the cat they call "Mithos the Destroyer", loyal to the Suzerain and his empire in the north. Standing about Mithos, stepping out from the fog, is the army of the Sa Mau. Perhaps fifty cats, perhaps five thousand, long-limbed and lean.

The Queen watches them steadily. "So many of you, just for me?" she asks. Her words are answered by wailing gulls, which circle over the harbour. Their cries momentarily confuse her. They sound like the cries of a lost kitten.

"Not for you: for your magic. For your tricks," growls Mithos. No hint of respect for the doomed Queen. Mithos serves only the Suzerain.

The Queen looks into his eyes. She sees many ages of the moon. She sees bitterness without boundary, untiring malice. A glance over her shoulder at the retreating ship. Her son is safe. It has not been in vain.

The soldiers of the Sa stalk towards her shoulder-to-shoulder, flashing their fangs, poised for battle.

But the Queen addresses them as old friends. "Long ago, the Tygrine and the Sa ruled side by side, in peace. Can that time not come again?" Her golden eyes widen and light

seems to flow from them.

The soldiers of the Sa hesitate. Unsheathed claws falter.

"Fools!" hisses Mithos. "This is sorcery! Can you not see how she casts her spell over you? The time of the Tygrine is over! Long live the Suzerain! Long live the Sa!"

"Long live the Suzerain! Long live the Sa!" echo the soldiers. They surge out of the shadows, an endless stream of fighters, like termites from the husk of a tree.

The Tygrine Queen makes no move to run. "Mati..." she murmurs.

Even the gulls are still.

The first Pillar

A Stranger in the Market-Place~



Over and over again, the sun wrestled the moon for dominance of the earth, a ritual dividing night from day. When he first became aware of this struggle, Mati's was a floating home of shrieking gulls and furious surf. Soon the cries of the gulls faded and the ocean mellowed. Its purr was Mati's lullaby, the creaking of the ship's planks his morning chorus. Until today. On this morning, Mati awoke to unfamiliar sounds: the thumping of heavy crates being lifted onto the deck, voices barking directions, the strains and beats of an unknown song. Deep within the ship, the engine groaned. The small ruddy brown cat stretched for a few moments, then snapped to attention. Perhaps he had finally arrived – but where?

It seemed an eternity since Mati had first been nudged into the cargo hatch of the ship in the harbour of his old

home. He recalled his mother's words: "Where the ship draws to land, there you must leave it. Until then, stay safe and don't let yourself be seen."

"And what then, Amma, what then?"

"Then, my son, you will be truly alone, free to follow your senses, to carve out a new life in a very different world. Let the three pillars be your guide."

He was only a catling, barely out of kittenhood, and memories of his life before the voyage were smudged like the ink of an old book. He had survived the long days on the ship undetected, stealing scraps. Indeed, Mati considered himself a master thief. He prided himself on his stealth. On a mission to the kitchen or the small dining room where the crew sat for meals, Mati imagined himself invisible, his narrow body hugging the dark cabin walls, dissolving into shadow.

Mati had found it easy to make his way around the ship unnoticed. There were numerous gaps between crate and corridor through which a stowaway cat could scramble. He could even squat under a chair only tail-lengths away from crew members, realizing that these furless giants could smell him no more than they could a ghost.

Thirst was simpler to quench. Mati had soon discovered the shower cubicle, where the drizzle of a faulty showerhead ensured he could drink his fill once the crew were up and about the ship. But one trip above deck was enough for the catling, terrified by the impossible expanse of ocean and the salty air that stiffened his whiskers and stung his eyes. His

territory was the world below deck, with its satisfying odour of the crew's rubber boots, oil and leather.

On this morning, as unfamiliar sounds and smells alerted him to a change in the world, Mati froze in the cargo hatch and listened to the fading murmur of the ship's engine. Whiskers bristling with excitement, he pounced onto a ledge and out of the cargo hatch until, neck craned, he was peering into a damp autumn morning. Even in this dull light, his eyes ached as they adapted. A hazy sun was rising over looming grey buildings.

Mati's mouth opened and his nose crinkled. He could taste the moisture in the air and knew that the ship had finally moored in fresh water.

After weeks onboard and remembering almost nothing from his previous life, Mati was overwhelmed by a sudden fear. This would be his first opportunity to leave the ship but his surroundings looked so strange. He missed the real home he could hardly remember and the mother he loved. What would she have advised?

He remembered again what she had told him before withdrawing from the ship: "Where the ship draws to land, there you must leave it."

Glancing about, Mati noted that the vessel had moored at a dock, on which men were preparing a small crane to lift the cargo onto dry land. He crept towards the left side of the deck, hiding between some pipes. Nearby, a gangplank had just been laid, and Mati was about to run down it when

he saw two pairs of boots rushing towards him. Oblivious to Mati, the men marched up the gangplank, dragging a trolley behind them. Mati glanced back between the pipes to find the deck now blocked by a huge crate, which crew members were fastening to the crane.

"Mate, what are you doing?" demanded one of the men pulling the trolley.

Mati glanced up guiltily before realizing that the question was directed at one of the crew members handling the crate.

"B-crates off first, you will find these are the rules. White cottons, in style Oxford."

"I don't care if they're in style Buck Palace, they ain't coming off that way."

"Sir, I have my instructions!"

"Just back up, back up."

"B-crates first, please."

"Back up, will you, or we'll be here all day!"

"It's on the Instructions for Carriage. I have here copy if you like to inspect, it specifically say..."

"Listen sunshine, you're in England now and you might like to show a bit of common sense..."

"There is absolutely no need for..."

Although Mati understood human chatter, he scarcely had a sense of what the men were arguing about. He was busy making furious calculations. The men had not yet noticed him hiding between the pipes, but he had better leave quickly

with this argument looming above his head. He dashed under the trolley on the gangplank. From here he judged that he was quite close to land, only perhaps two or three tail-lengths away if he leapt at an angle from the gangplank. After a moment's deliberation, Mati crept out from under the trolley. He drew himself together, took a deep breath and cleared the stretch with a running jump. He landed gracelessly and scrambled away from the ship, zigzagging along the ground with lurching steps. He collapsed under a pile of plastic chairs beside the dockers' yard. Nearby, men in overalls smoked cigarettes and drank milky tea from foam cups. Mati realized that a life on the ship had taught him how to keep his balance on the shifting seas but had ill-equipped him for land. It took him a few moments to adjust.

Mati turned back to bid farewell to the ship and hastened along the dock past warehouses and wastelands of concrete, following the river upstream. He passed lonely fishermen dotted along the riverbank and hurried beneath bridges that trembled under traffic. Finally he came to a small park flanked by peeling metal railings. He spotted the bare feet of an old man asleep on a bench. The man clutched a mottled blanket, a skinny dog with a rope for a collar asleep on the grass beside him. Mati hesitated, backed away from the park, skirting around it until he saw stalls where goods were being exchanged for metal discs and pieces of paper. He spotted fabrics, sparkling silver trinkets, wooden objects and all manner of curiosities. This must have been a popular spot

with the humans, as Mati noted a growing crowd clucking over the wares on display.

Pressed down low to the ground, the soft fur of his belly almost stroking the tarmac, Mati slunk under people's legs to investigate the market-place. He lost his fears completely when he spotted a pigeon pecking about in the dust, a bird with a body almost as large as his own but a head scarcely bigger than his muzzle. Mati ran towards it but the bird saw him coming and fluttered away noisily in a gust of grime and feathers.

"Ah! Come on!" cried Mati, "Come back! Please come back! I won't hurt you!"

Suddenly his nostrils filled with the smell of cooking meat. Seized with intense hunger, Mati followed his nose to a stall selling a collection of savoury meals. A queue of people snaked around one side. Along the other, Mati noticed a piece of spiced chicken that had fallen beside the bins. He made an excited dash for it, licking his lips in anticipation.

"And who do you think you are?" hissed a voice. Mati froze in his tracks. Three pairs of slanted green eyes were staring at him.